

## Rating Ronald Reagan

### A Look Back at News Coverage of the Reagan Presidency

How did the media treat the Reagan presidency? How does his coverage compare to that of his opponents and successors? This issue of *Media Monitor* examines Mr. Reagan's media image from 1980 through 1988, based on content analyses by CMPA and other scholars.

#### ***Major Findings:***

##### *The Candidate*

In 1980 Reagan and Jimmy Carter both got five times as many negative as positive comments on TV news. *Page 2*

But in 1984 Walter Mondale got a majority of good press, while judgments of Reagan sank to 10 to 1 negative. *Page 2*

##### *Enter Reagan*

In 1981 the new administration's coverage was over 2 to 1 negative. *Page 3*

Reagan's policies fared even worse, running a 3 to 1 negative ratio in the national press; his foreign policy took the hardest hits. *Page 4*

Reagan, Clinton, and George W. Bush all got mostly negative coverage during their first year in office, but Reagan's was the worst. *Page 3*

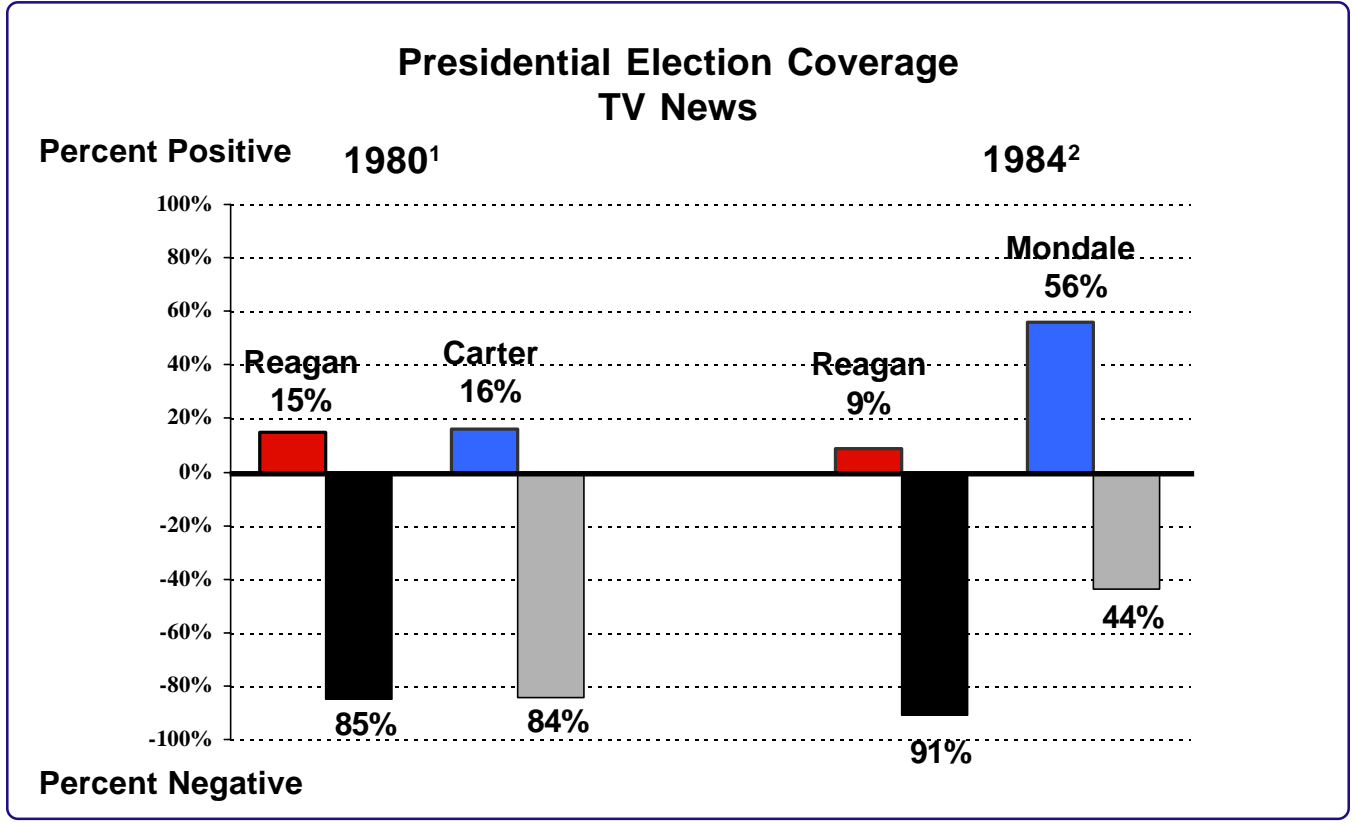
##### *The Incumbent*

In 1983 Reagan's "mid-term reviews" were 13 to 1 negative on TV News. *Page 6*

Gorbachev fared better than Reagan in coverage of their summit meetings. *Page 5*

##### *Exit Reagan*

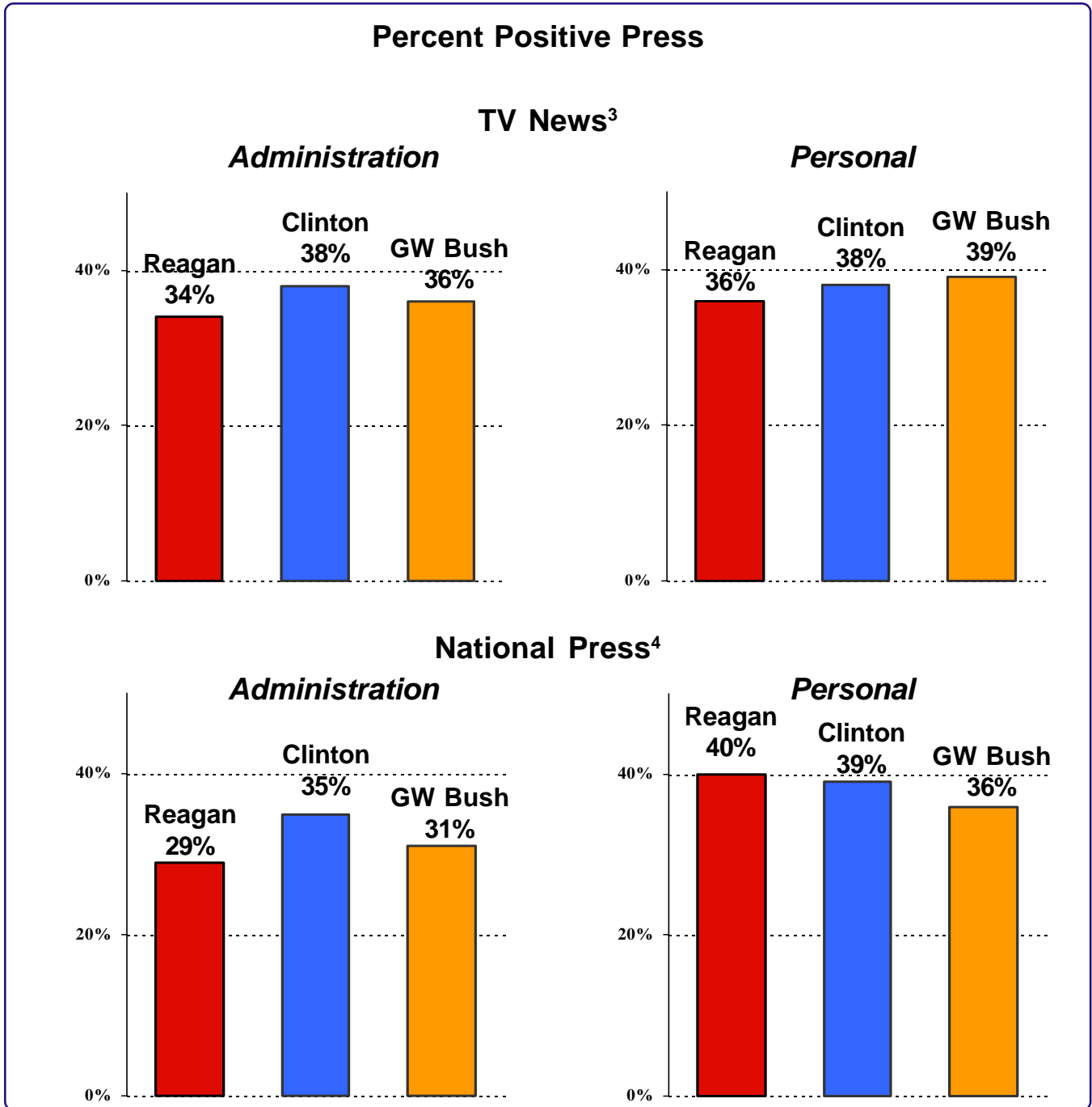
As a "lame duck" after the 1988 election, Reagan's TV news coverage was 2 to 1 negative - about the same as when he entered office. *Page 6*



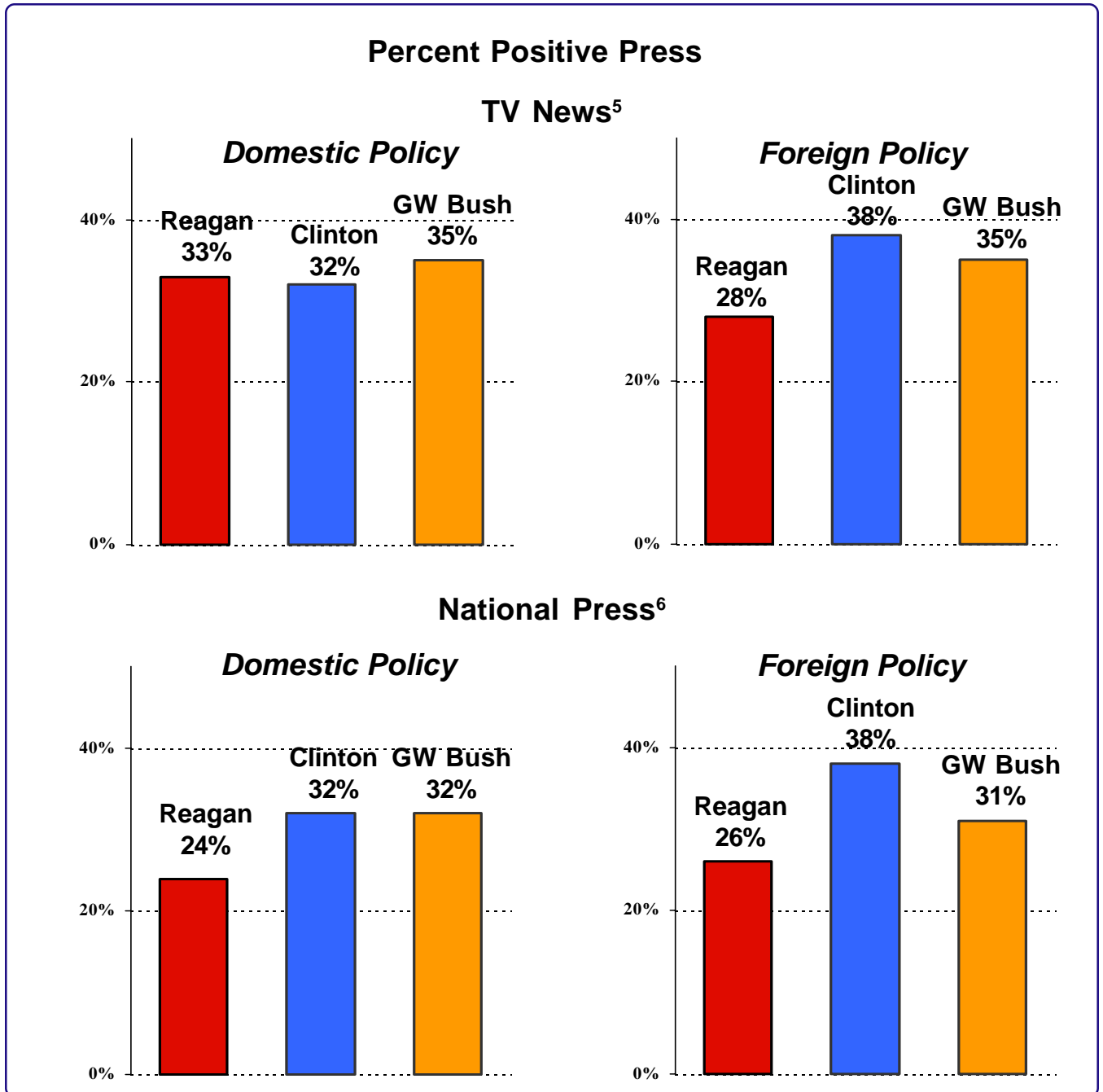
Both Ronald Reagan and Jimmy Carter received overwhelmingly negative coverage on TV news during the 1980 general election campaign. But in 1984 the Democratic challenger, Walter Mondale, received a majority of positive coverage, while Reagan's coverage was ten to one negative.

(To determine how much good or bad press a president receives, we note every positive or negative evaluation of their record, policies, personal character and performance. Our tallies include all on-air opinions expressed by sources and reporters, excluding neutral or ambiguous statements. For examples of evaluations see page 7.)

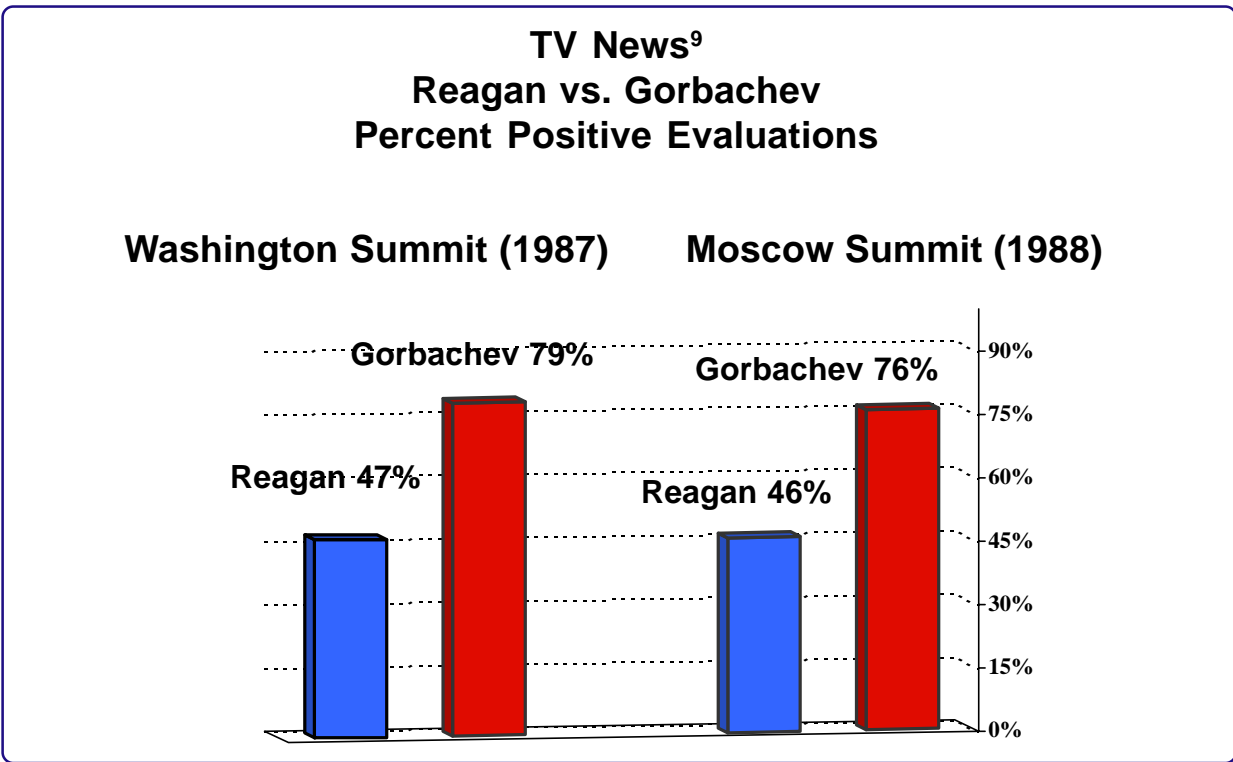
*Note: In addition to our own studies, this Media Monitor draws on the work of former Georgetown political scientist Michael Robinson, who pioneered the statement-based scientific content analysis that was the original model for CMPA's political news studies. The references for the data represented in these tables appear on page eight.*



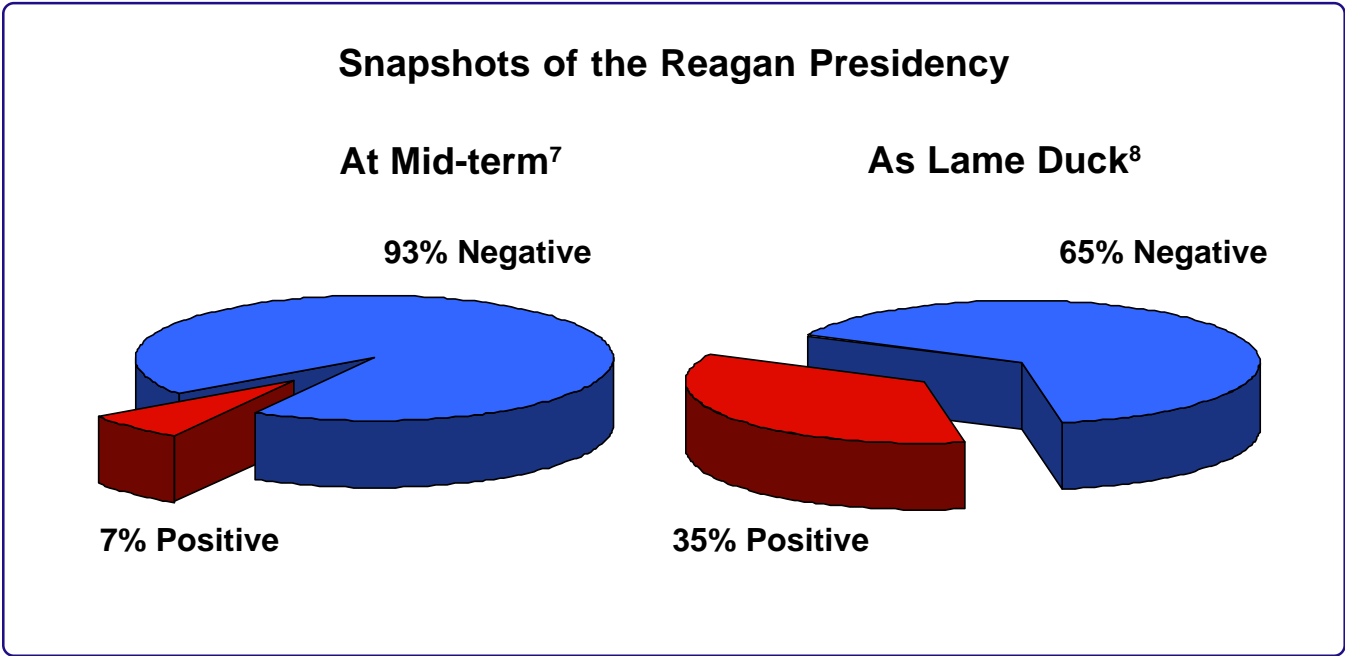
During their first year in office, the Reagan administration received worse press than the Clinton and GW Bush administrations. Reagan personally fared worst on TV news but came out best in the *New York Times* and *Washington Post*.



The national press rated Reagan's foreign and domestic policies worse than those of Clinton and Bush. On TV news Reagan's foreign policies also got the lowest marks.



Reagan received far worse press than his Soviet counterpart during the summit meetings in Washington, D.C. in 1987 and Moscow in 1988.



A 1983 study by Robinson found that Ronald Reagan's press was 13 to 1 negative on TV news midway through his first term. CMPA studied Reagan's TV news coverage as a "lame duck" president, from election day 1988 to inauguration day 1989, when George H. W. Bush took office. The 2 to 1 negative ratio of evaluations suggests that the media's first look back at the Reagan presidency was far less laudatory than the coverage that followed his death in June 2004.

**Examples of evaluations:****Domestic Policy:**

“Saying he’s [Reagan] balancing the budget while cutting bureaucracy... just shows where the insensitivity is and how removed he is from the lives of most people.”  
—day care center operator, NBC, 10/10/81

“While President Reagan was in St. Louis today speaking about an America on the mend, there was another America not far off... of 12 million unemployed, where the wounds are still too fresh and painful to mend.”  
—Dan Rather, CBS, 2/1/83

**Elections:**

“[Reagan's] campaign highlights the images and hides from the issues.”  
—Lesley Stahl, CBS, 10/04/84

“The president offered pomp and platitudes... a cynical campaign, manipulative.”  
—Chris Wallace, NBC, 11/06/84

**The Summits:**

“The three images [of Reagan] are: he's an actor; he's a cowboy, and... he's a Rambo, some sort of wild man.” —British professor, CBS, 6/3/88

“I think Mikhail Gorbachev is an outstanding statesman.”  
—Andre Sakharov, ABC, 6/3/88

**Iran Contra:**

“At best (his explanation of IranContra) tends to reinforce the notion that Mr. Reagan isn’t up to the job; at worst, the idea that he isn’t telling the truth.”  
—Sam Donaldson, ABC, 5/15/87

**Transition to GHW Bush:**

“Mr. Reagan got off to a bad start and ended badly.”  
—Vernon Jordan, Urban League, ABC, 1/14/89

**References:**

- <sup>1</sup> Based on evaluations on the "CBS Evening News," January 1-November 3, 1980. From Robinson, M. J. & Sheehan, M. A. (1983). *Over the Wire and on TV*. New York: Russell Sage.
- <sup>2</sup> Based on evaluations on the ABC, CBS, and NBC evening news, Labor Day to Election Day, 1984. From Clancey, M. & Robinson, M. J., "General Election Coverage: Part I," *Public Opinion*, December-January 1985.
- <sup>3</sup> Based on evaluations made by sources and reporters on the ABC, CBS, and NBC evening news during the first year of each administration (1981, 1993, and 2001).
- <sup>4</sup> Based on evaluations appearing in front page stories of the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* in 1981, 1993, and 2001.
- <sup>5</sup> Based on evaluations on the ABC, CBS, and NBC evening news during the first year of each administration in 1981, 1993, and 2001.
- <sup>6</sup> Based on evaluations appearing in front page stories of the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* in 1981, 1993, and 2001.
- <sup>7</sup> Based on stories on the ABC, CBS, and NBC evening news January 1-February 28, 1983. From Robinson, M. J., Clancey, M. and Grand, L. "With Friends like These...", *Public Opinion*, June/July 1983.
- <sup>8</sup> Based on stories on the ABC, CBS, and NBC evening news Election Day 1988 to Inauguration Day 1989.
- <sup>9</sup> Based on evaluations on the ABC, CBS, and NBC evening news during the Washington, D.C. (11/30-12-10/87) and Moscow (5/22-6/5/88) summits.

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